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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect of viewing professional wrestling programs on first grade boys' violent and aggressive behavior. Interviews were conducted, in focus groups of 4 children, with 16 students who watched wrestling 4-6 hours a week. The children indicated that they enjoyed watching professional wrestling and that after viewing, they felt like they wanted to wrestle someone. Results show a correlation between television violence and aggressive and violent behaviors in children. (JPB)

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Tittle: Professional Wrestling: Can watching it bring out aggressive and violent behaviors in children?

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Abstract: Violent and aggressive behaviors in children who view professional wrestling was investigated. Twenty seven six and seven-year-old boys in the first grade were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in focus groups of four children. They responded to twelve questions and became specific about certain topics. The results of the interviews concluded that children enjoyed watching professional wrestling and acted in aggressive and violent behaviors. The findings did comply with other researcher's results on the effects of television violence.

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"It's Monday night in America, do you know where your children are?" You might see this advertised before the ten o'clock news and say to yourself that my children are home. Your children are home, but they may be a part of the millions of other children who are being exposed to scripted violence, aggressive behavior, blatant sex and obscene language. They are not watching a rated R movie; instead they are watching the increasingly popular television show known as professional wrestling. Professional wrestling has been around for many years, but it has only become popular within the last decade. It is the highest rated shows from number one to seven on cable television today. The ever-popular cartoon, The Rugrats has taken eighth place to this new trend in sports. One might say, "So, what's the big deal about children watching wrestling when there is no harm being done?" As a first grade teacher, I was shocked and confused when the boys in my class were transforming recess into a wrestling event. There were two six-year-old boys wrestling each other while the other children cheered on. I became terrified as I saw one child rap his forearm around the other boy's neck and started to squeeze. I ran over and broke the two boys up. I became very firm with them and they continued to tell me that they were only playing like they do on wrestling. Is this what we consider creative play for children or is it a warning sign of children exhibiting aggressive and antisocial behaviors at a very early age. Children of all ages watch wrestling and attend wrestling events across America.

What kind of effect does violent television such as wrestling have on children? I saw a three-year-old boy making an obscene hand gesture while watching wrestling on television. I also saw an African American male being portrayed as a pimp with two women as his prostitutes. He was selling these two women to a fan in the audience. This was aired before ten o'clock at night. Are obscene gestures, foul language, prostitution, and aggressive behavior considered entertainment television? Are your children being exposed to it? What effects do these so called role models have on children in our society today?

Children view violence everyday of their lives. Television has become a close duplicate to a surrogate baby-sitter or play date for many caretakers in today's society. Young children are being exposed to television as equivalent to books. The exposure to television can cause serious aggressive and antisocial behaviors in many children. The majority of Americans agree that entertainment television is too violent, that this is harmful to society, and that we as a society have become desensitized to violence (Atkin, 1984,p.617). Evidence shows that children who are exposed to violent acts will tend to solve conflicts through the use of aggression. Many children view aggressive sorting events on televisions that are of high interest to them. The games portrayed exhibit levels of high enjoyment by parents, older siblings, and children of all ages with a great emphasis on the male population. One sporting event that is becoming increasingly popular over

the years has been professional wrestling. It is enjoyed by children of all ages and adults of both sexes. Children are seeing adults perform acts of violence, exhibit antisocial behavior, exposure to sexual content and aggressive behaviors while millions of people are cheering it on. Excessive amounts of viewing this type of entertainment can have serious effects on children.

What We Know About the Exposure to Violence on Television

The exposure to violent acts of aggression can have many diverse effects on children. Children imitate aggressive behavior immediately after they have seen it. This is especially true of children who have viewed wrestling programs for one to tow and sometimes three hours in length. The minds of young children are so impressionable. The one reason why professional wrestling has become so popular is because they market their programming and products towards children and teenagers. These promoters are becoming very wealthy at the expense of our children. They will retrieve and store what they see after viewing this aggression. The observational learning theory states that children learn to behave aggressively from the violence they see on television in the same way they learn social and cognitive skills they learn from their parents (Pearl, 1984). Parents accompany their children to these sporting events and children than model the wrestlers as well as their own parents who are imitating these aggressive and violent acts.

There have been many studies completed documenting the violent acts that appear on television dating back from 1952. From 1952 through 1967, studies found a great deal of violence on television shows. In the 1960's and the 1970's, the Surgeon General's conclusion was that television violence has an adverse effect on certain members in our society (Huesmann and Malamuth, 1986,p.5). From the 1970's to the present many people are becoming increasingly concerned abut the negativity shown to children throughout television viewing and other media technologies, as in the case of professional wrestling. Smith (1993) finds that the overall pattern of research findings indicates a positive association between television violence and aggressive behavior.

One analysis in 1954 reported an average of eleven threats or acts of violence per hour (Pearl, 1984). In the 1990's there is a report of 26.4 violent acts per hour (NAEYC, 1990.p.5). The findings show the obvious increase of 15.4 hours in violence being viewed by our children. Just think of the amount of violent acts per hour in one professional wrestling program. It's a market that promotes violence, aggression, and sex. However, it provides, "entertainment with action and drama for all to watch" as stated by the CEO of one professional wrestling franchise, Vince McMahon. By the time a child gets to kindergarten, that child has watched about 5,000 hours of television. That's more time than he or she will spend in an elementary classroom (Huston, 1992,p.19). According to an American

Psychological Association task force report on television and American society, by the time the child leaves elementary school, he or she will have witnessed about 8,000 murders and more than 10,000 other assorted acts of violence on television (Smith, 1993). This is a serious statistic to take into consideration when dealing with conflict resolution and positive ways to approach it.

The Effects of Exposure to Violent Acts

Now that the facts about violence on television have been noted, we need to focus on the effects exhibited by children who view the aggression. A controlled experimental laboratory research completed found that media material is especially likely to instigate aggression when viewers of this material were previously provoked (Turner, Hess. Peteron-Lewis, 1986,p.52). A paper by Centerwall (1993) the violence and aggressive tendencies in young children contribute to the growth of violent crime (Smith, 1993). As young children view wrestling, they look up to former prison inmates and porno stars as role models. Are they getting the sense that bashing someone over the back with a chair is accepted by society because they see it don on television by their role models?

The American Psychological Association reports that children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, more fearful of the world around them, more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways towards others. As

shown by the research, there is an obvious congruence between the exposure of violent acts of aggression and the long and short-term effects it has on children.

Both physical and psychological factors are taken into consideration when studying children. Children from very young ages are exposed to cartoons, videos, games, sporting events, news programs and commercials that exhibit random acts of violence. The violence is seen, learned and acted out. Are teachers going to have to be certified in refereeing along with their teaching certificates? Children learn new concepts and techniques by seeing and doing. Experimenting is a major developmental goal displayed by children as with creative play. Are our children experimenting and playing using aggression or violent acts as seen through the media?

Althea Huston says, "Children who watch the violent shows, even 'just funny' cartoons, were more likely to hit out at their playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished and were less willing to wait for things than those that watched non violent programs" (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982). Smith (1993,p.6) claims that children who are frequent viewers of media violence learn that aggression is a successful way to achieve goals. Children see these wrestlers who win as being successful because they have physically beaten and abused someone to become the WWF champion. They have now achieved this goal and have received lots of money, beautiful women and many friends who are cheering

this "champion" on. They are less likely to benefit from creative, imaginative play as the natural means to express feelings, overcome anger and gain self-control. These findings show the serious problems that children can experience socially and academically at home and at school throughout the growing years.

The degree to which violence effects children is dependent upon different characteristics of those children. Factors such as age, intellectual level, identification with television personalities, the total amount of television watched and the belief that television is realistic; effects the influences of television violence on behavior (Peterson and Peters, 1983). One factor not included is the degree of parental supervision of the media viewed. This is extremely important, as many children are latchkey kids.

Children watch three to five hours of television daily. This figure does not include media such as movies, video games and sporting events. Only ten percent of children's viewing time is spent watching program specifically intended for children. From television to cable, videos to video games, MTV to WEBtv, cartoons to sporting events, children are consistently being exposed to violence, aggression and antisocial behavior. The Rugrats has now dropped to number eight in the cable ratings because professional wrestling as taken the top seven slots. It is society who is advertising and marketing it and it is children who are being affected by it. Society will market anything towards children and teenagers

because it is them, who pick the toys, play the video games, buy the cards and magazines and watch the television programs. Whatever the variable, as parents and educators, it is our responsibility to target the problems and control the amount of viewing and exposure.

What Did the Children Tell Us

I decided to interview some children to see how much they know about wrestling and what they learn through watching it. I wanted to find out the effects that this kind of sports entertainment has on young children in our society. Professional wrestling is promoting aggressive behavior, profanity and inappropriate sexual behaviors. When young children view these events, do they store and then imitate their behaviors? Are these wrestlers their idols? Do they have their own wrestling events as a form of creative and imaginative play? These are all pertinent questions and conclusions when six and seven-year-old children are being affected by what parents may think is harmless.

I interviewed twenty seven six and seven-year-old boys who are currently in first grade. They are attending public school in the Bronx. The children are from low socioeconomic families. The ability level of the boys very from average to high I.Q.'s for first grade. I conducted focus groups of four children in which I had questions that the children responded to and then became specific about certain

topics. I orally asked the groups, "How many of you watch wrestling on a weekly basis?" Sixty percent responded that they watch the programs weekly. Twenty two percent are not allowed to watch wrestling at home. Nineteen percent started watching wrestling when they entered first grade. I then interviewed the sixteen boys who watch wrestling on a weekly basis. I was surprised and shocked at what and how much the boys knew just by viewing these wrestling events.

The sixteen boys watching wrestling on an average of four to six hours a week depending on special events that may occur during the month. I asked the children if they had a favorite wrestler. Seventy eight percent of the students who watch wrestling responded yes. I asked the children to tell me who their favorite wrestler was and eighty-six responded, "Stone Cold Steve Austin", fourteen percent responded, "Goldberg". These are wrestlers who appear on two different professional wrestling who appear on two different professional wrestling programs that are extremely competitive for higher ratings. I asked, "why do you like these wrestlers out of everyone wrestling in the league?" They liked these two wrestlers because they are the best in the league. They have beaten the other wrestler. The children recognize these two wrestlers for their specific symbols. All twenty-seven boys knew the "sign" that Stone Cold use, both of his middle fingers. The children who did not watch wrestling knew that this was his sign as a result of so many kids displaying it throughout the school day. This shows that

even if your child does not watch wrestling, they are being exposed to the negative effects of this attraction.

When I talked to the children about watching wrestling and how much time is allotted during the week to this, I also wanted to know whom they were watching it with. I asked twenty-one boys who watched wrestling, "Whom do you watch wrestling events with?" Sixty-two of the children watch wrestling with an older sibling or cousin. Fourteen percent watch with their father or uncle. Twenty four percent watching wrestling by themselves. Keep in mind that this is four to six hours of extremely violent acts on a weekly basis. After watching wrestling, I wanted to find out the children's feelings and emotions, moods or temperament. All twenty-one children who view this so called "entertainment television" said that they feel strong and they feel like they want to wrestle someone. Then we wonder why children can become so excited and energetic while playing with friends. Realistically, wrestling moves, aggressive behavior and foul language brings about these children's excitement. Is this what is going to be considered "imaginative play?" I asked the children, "Who do you wrestle with after watching professional wrestling on television?" Forty eight percent wrestle with a sibling. Fourteen percent wrestle with a friend at home and the same percentage wrestle with their fathers. Nineteen percent wrestle with a friend at school because there is no one to wrestle with at home. Four percent do not wrestle with anyone.

After conducting these focus groups and the individual interviews, I was shocked by how many children knew about this craze that has sweaped the nation. Eighty six percent of the children showed me their special move, known as the Stone Cold Stunner. Fourteen percent did not have a special move, but showed me one that all the wrestlers do on television. Forty eight percent of the boys have clothing and action figures at home. Is this what we want our children to be playing with. It is enough that children going to be exposed to drugs, alcohol, sex, guns, gangs and violence at least once in their lives. Can we help prevent aggressive play and violent behaviors in a first grader during playtime? Many educators and parents that I have spoken to see professional wrestling as an increasing problem among our youths and children.

Smith reported that children would have witnessed more that 10,000 acts of violence before they leave elementary school. This was reported back in 1993. Six years have passed and professional wrestling has become rated in the top from one to six as the most watched television. How many violent acts are children witnessing when watching one hour of professional wrestling on television? These statistics are obviously increasing, as television becomes more explicit and violent. Young children do not realize that this is acting. They do not understand that the actors are using props to make themselves bleed. They are using profanity and

saying words like "pimp" and "ho". Do six and seven-year-old children really need to learn about this at such a young age?

Vince McMahon who is CEO of the World Wrestling Federation calls this, "entertainment with action and drama for all to watch." Mr.McMahon may need to come visit and observe an elementary school yard at lunchtime. He can watch the so-called drama that unfolds. When children are drop kicking each other and doing a Stone Cold Stunner on concrete. These children have never been in a wrestling ring or underneath it to see the springs that make the acting so much more dramatic. It's fine for him to expose children to this because he is becoming richer and richer. As children are becoming more insensitive to violence. Children need to be aware of the difference between reality and fantasy. Educators are becoming referees for children. Parents are supporting this or they don't know about it. The children are continuing to watch it, play it and hurt one another as a result. Parents need to become more aware and the FCC a little more sticter on what they are showing. Little House on the Prairie and The Waltons no longer exists. In today's world our children are "opening up cans of whoop ass" for enjoyment and as a form of conflict resolution. So, next Monday and Wednesday, while your children are at home, try reading them a story.

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